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# FOSTERING A HEALTHY SELF IMAGE IN THE YOUNG CHILD

*Carolyn Houdek*

How do we learn? Modern psychologists have discovered that the self concept or image we hold is so important that it conditions nearly everything we say and do. The self concept or self image acts very much like a quota for an individual. What a person believes about himself establishes limits as to what he can and will do. It is the writer's purpose to examine briefly the nature of the self image and those experiences which make decisive contributions to its development. After defining the self image and evaluating the impact of society and the teacher on its formation, we will consider bibliotherapy and the beneficial effects one may achieve through its use.

## **The Formation of the Self Image**

The human infant is born into a settled and organized society. The people in this society are engaged in a perpetual effort to satisfy their needs and desires. This society is responsive to the demands of its members, but it also enforces upon them its own peculiar framework of rules and limitations. From the very beginning the infant senses and responds to the socially acceptable pressures and ideas of his society. The young child learns to define the world about him in terms of the culture into which he was born. As he matures, he will soon apply the accepted experiences and labels of his culture as a part of his real self just as he has accepted the values and moral concepts of his culture.

It is through this interaction with the world about him that the child develops a self concept. This feeling is an accurate reflection of the treatment he receives from those who surround him in daily life. As Snygg points out, "the child can see himself in terms of his experiences and in terms of the treatment he receives from those responsible for his development." (6:83) Therefore, the self is an outgrowth of one's experiences with society, and one's behavior is conditioned and molded by personal experiences which themselves bear labels which his group or community have placed upon them.

How can the self be defined? It has been defined by Jersild as "a composite of thoughts and feelings which constitute a person's awareness of his individual existence, his conception of who and what he is." (3:9) It is the summation of all that he can call his very own.

Included in the self is a set of attitudes, commitments, ideas, and values. The self is a knower and a thing that is known as well. It can perceive ideas, attitudes, feelings, and values. The self is both constant and changeable; constant by nature, but changeable due to time and space. Jersild accepts the view that the self is composed of "reflected appraisals." (3:12) The molding of the self begins with the child's earliest experiences—experiences with people. His initial feelings of self-appraisal are provided by those who surround him, especially the "significant people." Obviously, one's "personality can never be isolated from the complex of interpersonal relations in which the person lives and has his being." (3:12) Furthermore, it has been suggested "that the attitudes and feelings of significant people can be communicated to the child by a process of empathy before the child is able to perceive and consciously recognize what is taking place, but at a later stage when the child is able to understand language and comes up against restraints of his freedom which as a young infant he had not clearly recognized as such, the self system evolves." (3:12) Thus, self unfolds over a period of time, it is not ready made. The development is influenced by the child's relationship with other people. The evolution of self is conditioned by the child's powers of perception. As the individual matures, he finds himself able to form larger concepts, he develops an appreciation of a system of values, and he becomes willing to take a stand for or against an idea or cause.

As Jersild points out, "A very important feature in the development of the self occurs when the child begins to recognize or to think that he recognizes differences between his own purposes and intentions and the intentions of others who deliberately or unknowingly further or oppose his intentions." (3:17) Moreover, "once the child has achieved the ability to attribute purpose and intention to the acts of others, this ability will have profound and pervasive influence on the development of the self system." (3:17) According to Redl and Wattenberg, psychologists and psychiatrists give support to the contention, "that during the first five years of life, the foundations are laid for many later personality traits. During those years a person's deepest attitudes toward himself and other people are developed, and the pattern for the control of impulses is largely established." (5:89) As the individual and his self are developing, there is an effort to maintain self. The individual strives, guided by his self-image, to be himself. This can be seen in his attitudes and actions regarding himself despite society's judgment of them. Thus, a person's behavior stands as an expression of an effort to maintain his evaluation of self.

Even though the self is an evolving thing, growing and changing, it contains a built-in mechanism designed to halt selected growth and change. A person wants to maintain his selfhood even though it may not be correct. A person commands many techniques for maintaining his self concept. Among them are such various behavior patterns as rationalization, self denial, suppression, projection, and defense through the opposite, to name but a few.

Thus, in his relationships with others, the individual seeks those reactions which make him feel important and wanted, give him emotional and physical security, assure him that he is loved and can love, help him feel accepted by the world around him. When the desirable relationships with others exist and the above-mentioned psychological needs are met, approval of one's self image follows. When a person disapproves of his self image, his feelings are negative and he often learns with difficulty.

Cronbach points out that "success in any area of living can act as an emotional tonic. No single incident or no single type of failure destroys the self concept, but when the child encounters criticism over and over again, either because he does poorly or because adults hold up high standards for him, he then begins to sense a feeling of incompetency." (1:112) Therefore, it becomes very important for one to have a healthy outlook on himself, to feel that he is developing the potentials of his "real self," i.e., using them to best advantage. A healthy concept of self allows for the acceptance of others and the establishment of meaningful relationships with them. On the other hand, the person who lacks good mental health has failed to develop his potentialities to his best advantage. He has been unable to assimilate his experiences in life so as to be able to accept others and the sometimes harsh realities of everyday living. He is at odds with himself and has not established any workable standards of his own; he has played false with himself by living with an image that bears no relationship to reality.

#### **The Role of the Teacher**

Now that we know a little more about the self image, what can one do as a teacher to help the child in his struggle to build a healthy self concept? In seeking to understand her children better, the teacher can utilize her powers of observation. A listening ear and a seeing heart can tell you a great deal. In order to make her observations more meaningful, the teacher must use her knowledge of those characteristics common to six-year-olds. In some ways the similarities

within this age group outweigh the differences. The child who varies from the norm may appear to be quite normal in the eyes of his teacher, but owing to his self image he may think of himself as a freak.

A previous teacher may be of great help by pointing out some behavior patterns or experiences that will aid your efforts to gain a better understanding of a child. She may remember that Bill "took it hard" when a new baby arrived in his home, reverting to immature behavior marked by a loss of toilet habits and displays of bad temper. Parent-teacher conferences may furnish other clues to a better understanding of the child and the environment from which he comes. Likewise, cumulative school records provide some insight into the mind of the child, through test scores, health records, and the marital status of his parents. Often anecdotal records are preserved along with cumulative records and such descriptions of behavior may furnish some clues to persistent and unhealthy personality traits. Perhaps after using such resources the child's self image may be somewhat clearer to his teacher. But how adequate is the information gleaned from the above-mentioned records? For the most part we are looking at the child through the eyes of others and not through the eyes with which he views himself. The best available substitute (and here we must settle for a substitute) is the leisurely conversation—the one-to-one relationship. Obviously, this is not always possible, and so the teacher must be satisfied with and use the less adequate traditional sources of information with the proper caution.

When the child has confidence in himself, he is ready to learn, to cooperate with others, to behave as a responsible individual. Therefore, the teacher should concentrate her best efforts on the building of self-confidence in each child. It is imperative that the children be encouraged to see themselves as liked, wanted, acceptable, and worthy. There are many means by which teachers may build self-confidence and the desirable kind of self image in their children. For example, the proper classroom atmosphere may be used to this end. In warm and friendly surroundings the children's fear of failure, rejection, or harsh criticism may be reduced. A child also needs to feel that he has some importance as an individual in his own right. Each child needs some skill that can become his speciality, be it ever so insignificant to an adult. Every child should be able to bask in the glow of recognition for his particular trick, skill, or talent. Success in his speciality is food for his ego and necessary for the building of a healthy self image. His willingness to increase his skill in a given area

is strengthened by his experience in an area where he does enjoy success.

The teacher's handling of discipline in her room has an important bearing on the molding of a child's self image. Does the discipline contribute to the development of self control and emotional stability? Is it meted out in a consistent, reasonable, fair and firm way? Is it the type of discipline that tolerates one day what it disapproves of the next day? Such conduct on the part of the teacher makes it difficult for her children to build stable behavioral values. The way you accept each child each day is of utmost significance for the building of a healthy self image. Friendship, love, and understanding are basic to the needs of all children, yet so many children are literally starved for such attention. In many cases the school is the child's only source of the affection and understanding that is so essential to their emotional development. Affection and friendship are expressed in many ways in the classroom. It can come through playing games, reading poems and stories, planning activities, working, or enjoying a party. As she goes through her daily routine the teacher must treat her children with the same kind of respect and affection she expects to receive from them.

One must develop responsibility within the group. The feeling that one is needed also contributes to the growth of a good self concept. Doing something useful with the group (carrying his fair share of the group's responsibilities) develops a sense of belonging and builds a child's ego. The teacher should not be reluctant to praise a job well done, be it ever so trivial. Simple tasks such as watering plants, keeping books and supplies in order, and caring for the class pets help to develop a sense of responsibility.

#### **Reading as a Therapeutic Technique**

Another technique for bolstering the self image involves the use of books. Clinically speaking, the use of books for this particular purpose is known as bibliotherapy. "Bibliotherapy is reading designed to give the child the specific experiences he lacks to satisfy basic psychological needs. The use of stories and books in therapy implies a healing process. Used therapeutically, reading gives a child an opportunity to be one with a book character in needs, conflicts, motives, and experiences which are similar to his own." (4:4) The teacher need not be a specialist in this area, for as she evaluates the child's needs she may, through the medium of books, be able to influence his self image by providing a vicarious experience for him through

his reading. The teacher can show the child that other children have the same emotional responses and that they are not unnatural. She can lead the child to see his little brother or sister as a lovable and amusing member of the family rather than as a pest. Hopefully, she can bring him to realize and accept his limitations (physical, social, mental, or economic) through books that show how others with similar limitations were able to become useful and happy persons.

Sometimes the day's reading lesson can, with a little teacher-direction, cast a different light on a child's problem or inadequacy. For example, the child who selfishly begs for new toys or things for himself will discover in "A Surprise for Father" in *The Little White House* the joy and satisfaction of thinking about another person. The boy who has to make do with old toys while his friends parade before him with new ones may learn that old things can gain prestige when he reads about Tom's old sled winning the race in "The Old Sled" in *On Cherry Street*. The child who feels at times that mother is not doing her best for him will find in *Little Bear* by Else Homelund Minarik, that all mothers have something in common, they never forget and they never will. The new boy in the room will find a clue to solving his loneliness when he reads *Who Will Be My Friend?* The child who would like to leave home may find, in *My Own Little House*, a release for his feelings. Some books which are well designed to help a child to adjust to the new experience of a baby in the home are *A Baby Sister for Francis* by Russell Hoban, *Judy's Baby* by Sally Scott and *A Tiny Baby for You* by Nancy Langstaff.

It is natural for the six-year-old to harbor jealous feelings towards a brother or sister. However, he need never feel severe pangs of guilt after hearing about the girl who, in *Giving Away Suzanne* by Lois Duncan, traded her little sister for a goldfish. The joys of having a brother or sister are so nicely presented in *Have You Seen My Brother?* by Elizabeth Guilfoile, *My Sister and I* by Helen Buckley, and *The Quiet Street* by Lois Dubkin. *The Very Little Girl* by Phyllis Krasilovsky relates simply, with few words and many every day comparisons, how a tiny child grows and grows until she outgrows her chair, table, and bed and becomes quite big enough for the wonderful surprise of being "big sister" to her tiny new baby brother.

It is very important that the child have a sense of growing and growing up. To grow taller, to know more, and to do things on his own is essential to the child's self image. Dorothy Brown Thompson's

poem *Bigger* points up the advantage of having grown up to be six-years-old.

The Cow is big. Her eyes are round.  
 She makes a very scary sound.  
 I'm rather glad the fence is tall—  
 I don't feel quite so weak and small.  
 And yet I'm not afraid. You see,  
 I'm six-years-old—and she's just three. (2:38)

The first stanza emphasizes three very prominent features of the cow: her size, her eyes, and her noise. Without great elaboration and with childlike directness, she gives reasons for finding protection and reassurance in the "tall" fence. In the final stanza the child convinces himself that he is not afraid, and with the last line the child senses the importance of age; i.e., that age and size are relative, but that age probably has some advantage over size.

Thus, it is of utmost importance that the teacher do all that is possible to provide the atmosphere, love, and guidance necessary to the development of a healthy self image. Every personal and social adjustment the child makes is determined by his self image. Even the way a child reads a story is influenced by his ideas about himself. Therefore, teachers need to find simple and practical keys with which to unlock the hidden self image of the young child.

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